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CIA Critic Testifies On Air Operations

By Timothy S. Robinson
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When Victor Marchetti talks, the CIA listens.

Yesterday, the ex-CIA official's forum was a witness chair in a federal courtroom here, from which he spoke almost casually about the intelligence agency's alleged role as the world's largest airline conglomerate.

A CIA representative was late for Marchetti's testimony, but Marchetti said he was sure the agency would get a report on what he had said anyway. The CIA man in a brief interview said nothing to discredit Marchetti's claim that the CIA would get such a report.

Marchetti, whose articles and books about the CIA have brought legal moves by the agency to prevent their publication, named various airlines he said were CIA fronts. The airlines were set up, he testified, so the U.S. could have quick access to planes and crews for paramilitary operations.

Marchetti was a witness in a civil suit growing out of of the death of an Agency for International Development official in South Vietnam in August, 1972.

The official, Roy Ferrence, was one of eight passengers killed instantly when the China Airlines plane in which he was flying crashed into Dragon Mountain 7½ miles south of Pleiku.

His widow, Jane Ferrence of 407 Orleans Circle SW, Vienna, is suing China Airlines and Air America—another alleged CIA airline—in connection with the crash.

Air America says it should not be a party to the suit, since it was a China Airlines plane that crashed while flying under a subcontract to Air America.

Marchetti's testimony was heard apparently as an attempt by Mrs. Ferrence's attorney, John Gionfriddo, to show that Air America and China Airlines are both operated by the CIA and therefore are both proper parties to the suit.

The former CIA aide, who said one of his titles with the agency was executive secretary to the executive committee on air matters, was the first witness presented to the six-member civil jury before U.S. District Judge John H. Pratt.

Marchetti gave his current profession as "writer" before being asked questions about his CIA days and the world of "plausible deniability" and "air proprietary operations."

He is under an injunction from a federal judge in Alexandria not to divulge government secrets before clearing such disclosures with the CIA, and Marchetti said that he did not believe he got into any new matters in his testimony yesterday.

Marchetti told of weekly meetings of the executive committee on air matters, during which CIA officials would discuss the operations of such airlines as Air America, Air Asia, Southern Air Transport, CAT/CAL (Civil Air Transport/China Airlines), and Intermountain Aviation.

He said the discussions even would deal with transfers of planes from one airline to another, and the purchase of new planes. Determining the exact size of the CIA's air operations was a problem, he added at one point.

He said later that one CIA official once described the air operations complex as bigger than the agency itself in terms of employees, and as having more aircraft than any U.S. airline.

Marchetti said the airline companies allegedly operated by the CIA "really did do business as part of their cover," but that their main purpose was to "provide air capabilities for CIA's paramilitary activities."

He said the airlines "fly in mercenaries, fly out wounded" and perform other such operations when American military forces do not want to be directly involved.

As Marchetti was preparing to leave the fourth floor of the courthouse, after testifying, an elevator door opened and a man carrying a briefcase got off. It was a CIA attorney, who said only that he had been called by someone in the Ferrence case to catch Marchetti's appearance on the stand.

"John!" cried Marchetti. "You're late! I've already testified."